I'd like to start by telling you about a woman who attended her 20-year high school reunion. At this reunion, she encountered her freshman year art teacher. Excitedly she shook his hand and explained that she had gone to college as a result of his inspiration, and that she was now an art professor at a large state university.

After the evening's festivities, the teacher sought out his former student. "Thank you for saying those nice things about my teaching. You really made my day." "you're welcome", she said as she hugged him. "But it is I who must thank you—you made my life."

I can relate to this woman's experience of being inspired by a teacher. In fact, one of the reasons I became a teacher is because of teachers I had throughout school. As a sophomore in high school, I took a "Western Civilization" class, From the beginning I was drawn in by Mr. Burns' passion for history. I can still hear his voice filled with excitement as he talked about the events leading up to the Russian Revolution. He was a tough teacher, pushing us to think critically, and offering several perspectives from which to consider a single issue. I was drawn in by his knowledge and passion, and they inspired me to work harder than I ever had. One of our assignments was to write a paper about an important or notorious figure in history, and I chose Joseph Stalin. With vigor I researched his life, political agenda, and countless atrocities. In the process of researching I found a poem about Stalin that hauntingly recalled his legacy. The poem sent chills down my spine, so I included it in the paper. Several weeks later I was working in the school library when the librarian approached me. She told me that Mr. Burns had excitedly shown the poem to her and had told her how impressed he was with my paper.

Not only did I feel proud to have impressed someone I so admired, but I also felt a desire to be such a catalyst for others. I knew I wanted to be a teacher, but it wasn't until my sophomore year of college that I found my passion. On the first day of my Introduction to Literature class, Peter, the professor, sauntered into class, slammed the door, and began reading poetry. The air buzzed with energy, and I felt the power of language and imagery wash over me. In that instant I knew I would become an English teacher, and I welcomed the day that I would begin to explore the power and beauty of language with students of my own.

Both Mr. Burns and peter inspired me to become a teacher. They motivated me to push myself farther, and ignited a vision for who I wanted to become. But who inspired me to embrace myself as a blind person? To whom did I look at with awe, thinking, "I want to be like that!"? The answers to these questions lie more within the journey I have taken than in the actions of one or two people.

As a child I did not consider myself blind. I knew that I had a vision problem but I tried to- fit in with the sighted people around me. But there were things that set me apart. I used large print books which I held to my face when I read, and when writing I squinted at the lines on the notebook paper. As a junior in high school, I was excited to take a Creative Writing class, but I found out on the first day that we would be reading each piece aloud to the entire class. Painstakingly I memorized each piece, hoping I would not need to hold it to my face. In the end nerves won out, and I ended up holding the paper to my face despite my memorizing efforts. As a child I didn't know any other visually impaired people, nor did I have the inclination to meet any. But when I was 8 years old my parents sent me to Lions Camp, a camp in Wisconsin for visually impaired children. I

did not want to be there. Mostly kids were being led around by sighted counselors, and even at that age I knew that wasn't what I wanted. So I did the only thing that came to my 8-year old mind: I told the counselor that if I couldn't go home I would go on a hunger strike. That created quick attention! My parents wanted me to stay for the rest of the week, which I did. But I never really felt like I fit.

The next time I met any visually impaired people happened during my junior year of high school. My mom had signed me up for a career seminar at the school for the blind. I went fairly willingly, but again my experience was disappointing. Again many kids walked in a train, with one hand on the shoulder of the person in front of them. Some rocked back and forth, and many seemed immature to me. There was, however, an important moment for me during this seminar. As some of the students and I were sitting around talking, I noticed one of the girls writing in a notebook. She held the notebook close to her face and wrote with dark pen. For the first time I was seeing a reflection of myself. I saw how I looked when I held a notebook close to my face, and that image made my stomach turn. I did not want to look like that.

Years later this memory would return to haunt me before I began my student teaching. As I pictured myself in front of the class, I saw with embarrassment the image of the girl at the seminar holding a notebook to her face. A slow doubt began to grow within me. How could I maintain the respect of middle or high school students if I stood before them holding papers to my face? How could I manage a classroom if I was more focused on the paper in front of me than the students around me? Fortunately between the years of high school and college, I had met some people who showed me alternatives. Upon graduating from high school I won a scholarship from the National Federation of

the Blind of Wisconsin. One stipulation of the scholarship was that I had to attend the week-long convention in July. At this convention I met blind and visually impaired people who were confident and competent. I met blind people who were teaching and from them I had learned two essential ingredients to being a successful blind person: skills and attitude. So when the memory from the career seminar resurfaced, I knew that I had options.

The summer before my student teaching I attended a training center in Minneapolis, MN called Blindness: Learning In New Dimensions BLIND Inc. I took classes in Braille, cane travel, computers, home-management, and industrial arts. Before attending Blind Inc, I knew that all students there wore sleep shades during their training. Although this initially made me nervous, I knew that in order to completely learn alternative skills, I could not use my residual vision. In addition to acquiring skills, confidence building was an integral component of my training at Blind Inc. The activity I had dreaded most from the onset became the one to launch my confidence. On one of our many outings, we traveled to Taylor's Falls, where we would each be climbing a 60 ft. rock wall. I had always been afraid of heights, cliffs, and ledges, so I trembled at the thought of what lie ahead. Each student took a turn putting on the harness and climbing the rock. As I started to climb, my classmates, who knew how terrified I was, began cheering and chanting. After what felt like only a moment of climbing, one of the instructors yelled, "you're almost at the anchor!". I couldn't believe I had climbed so quickly! Touching the anchor at the top, I flirted with the idea of lifting my sleep shades. I decided against it, thinking that I would only become afraid again. But I also realized

that I already was aware of everything I needed in that moment. Standing at the top of the rock, I truly felt that I could do anything.

Not every activity at the center was as dramatic as rock climbing, but all of them helped me to learn that blindness is only a small part of who I am. Since most of the instructors were blind, daily I saw that blindness, though sometimes inconvenient, is not a tragedy, and it doesn't limit the aspirations or experiences one has. I took this new-found confidence with me as I began my student teaching. I found that talking with students about my blindness created the type of open, positive community I had wanted to establish in the classroom. . .

I have noticed throughout my teaching the impact that role models have on children's lives. I have also noticed the power and importance of the media. I notice, for example, how my students perk up when I compare the Capulet party in Romeo and Juliet to a party on the "O.C.". And I instantly have their attention when we draw analogies between the boys in *Lord of the Flies* and the contestants on "Survivor". It is through the media that they receive many messages about who they are and who they want to become. Blind children are no different. So I thought it might be interesting to explore a few portrayals of blind people in movies, just to see the role models that exist.

Mr. Magoo and Matt Murdock in *Daredevil* present different images of blindness, but both are equally dangerous as to how they prepare kids for the future. Mr. Magoo stumbles and bumbles incompetently, and he serves as the brunt of many ill-intentioned jokes. In contrast the main character in Daredevil will not be bullied. In fact his mission is to rid the world of those who mistreat the underdog. In contrast to the bumbling fool, this character becomes the amazing blind person. After he goes blind he explains, "my

remaining senses functioned with superhuman sharpness. But most amazing of all, my sense of sound gave off a radar sense. “The problem with the super blind person is that it is not accurate or realistic. Although blind people do use their other senses to receive information, those senses do not take on superhuman power. When children are told that what they are doing is amazing, a grave injustice is being done to them. They need to understand that recognition comes from hard work, discipline, and talent. They need to be accountable for the same expectations as their sighted peers, and when they are called amazing, they are essentially let off the hook for more difficult tasks and assignments; they are not equal.

Virgil, the main character in *At First Sight* does have some skills. He uses a cane or dog to travel independently. But his profession of a massage therapist is a stereotypical job of blind people. His sister cooks and cleans for him even though he is an adult. One aspect of the movie I found interesting is the concept of seeing. In this movie he undergoes an operation which he hopes will restore his sight. However, after the operation he is unable to make sense of what he is seeing. In fact, he must first touch an object before his brain can register its meaning. His vision alone is not reliable. In fact his doctor tells him that “your eyesight will play tricks on you.” Being a blind person with some vision, I understand the complexity and difficulty of trying to rely on sight that is not always accurate. Earlier I mentioned that as a child I didn’t really feel like I fit. I couldn’t function completely as a sighted person, nor did I have the skills to be a competent blind person. To be competent, one needs to understand all the options and alternative techniques. If I had learned Braille as a child, I could have been spared many hours of memorization. I needed to learn Braille so that I didn’t have to hold papers in

front of my face in my classroom or in public. I find Braille to be more efficient in those circumstances. I do use a CCTV at home to grade papers, bills, or other printed information,.

One of the most confusing aspects of being blind but having some vision is whether to use a cane. I did not use a cane throughout my childhood and adolescence, but I began to struggle with that issue during my college years. I knew that carrying a cane meant that people would treat me differently; they would make assumptions about what the cane meant rather than to look beyond it at the person. I knew that to publicly identify myself as a blind person would be quite different than the quiet acceptance I thought I had resolved. I did not experience a moment of epiphany when I realized I needed a cane; there was not one dramatic incident that crystallized the realization. Rather, it was part of becoming who I wanted and needed to be. Many times, before using a cane, I would ask people directions. At a restaurant, I might ask where the restroom is, or at the airport I might ask where gate E2 is. Since I didn't have a cane, people would point and say, "over there". But more frustrating than their lack of directions was the condescending look and tone which clearly said, "are you stupid? Can't you read?" I am an intelligent person, and I began to resent the assumption people made to the contrary. The problem wasn't the lack of intelligence, it was simply the lack of eyesight.

Because I received training in Minnesota, I was in a place where no one knew me. This freedom enabled me to experience traveling with a cane without responding to innumerable questions from people who thought they knew me. As I mentioned earlier, my training was done under sleep shades, and it was probably travel class that frightened me the most. I had been used to relying on my vision, which wasn't always reliable to

begin with. The traveling under shades became easier with time, and the day came when I had my first solo travel experience, delivering menus to a local restaurant. Russel, the travel instructor, asked if I was ready, and I said no. This “no” nagged at me throughout the day, and I felt that I had failed, that I was letting myself down by not venturing out on my own. Finally, during the last class, I asked him if I could still deliver the menus, and he said I could. Menus in hand, I ventured out to the Green Mill. I used the techniques we had been working on; listening to parallel traffic, discerning differences in the terrain, listening for cues instead of trying to look at them. With a big smile on my face, I delivered the menus to the manager at Green Mill. Just as a funny side note, the manager was so happy to receive the Braille menus that he offered me a free martini. I declined, but I was thinking, “that sounds really good!”

I feel much more confident and sure now that I use a cane, but the decision is definitely a personal one. It only seems fair to give children all the options, all the information, and opportunities to test and experience. When you have some vision, people might be confused about why you carry a cane, but I find that much easier to explain than when I wasn’t using a cane, and I had to try to explain that I couldn’t see something.

As one learns the skills, it becomes easier to decide which are most helpful in any given situation. I prefer integrating all techniques. I think a good example of this is the way I design seating charts for the first day of school. In front of my room is a large table. Before each class I placed index cards on the table. On one side students found their names in print and Braille. On the other were grid coordinates, such as A1, C5, and E6. The letter represented the row in which the student would sit, and the number

represented the seat. In this way students walked into my classroom. I greeted them at the door and they found their note card, then quickly their seats. After the standard, “Hi I’m Ms. Koenig and it’s great to meet all of you.” I easily moved into, “you probably noticed that there are some raised bumps on the note card you just picked up. Does anyone know what they are/?” Students do recognize the dots as Braille, and I explain that they will see me using Braille for various activities because I’m blind. Students can be confused that I say “blind” but have some vision, so I explain that not everyone who is blind only sees darkness; there are many degrees of blindness. I proceed to talk about other techniques they would see me using. I explain that I walk with a cane, which served as a tool to help me find objects that might be in my path. But I don’t use a cane in my classroom. They’re usually fascinated by my Braille watch as well. The most important idea I want to convey in this first day discussion about blindness is that I am totally comfortable with my blindness. It is a characteristic, like being left-handed. The world is mostly designed for right-handed people. Whether its buttons, zippers, door knobs, or seats in a class, they are made for people who are right-handed. This doesn’t mean that left-handed people don’t button their buttons, zipper their pants, or open or close doors. They simply find another way to do the same task. Blindness is the same; although the world is made for sighted people, being blind doesn’t mean that one can’t accomplish the goals and vision they have created for themselves. After I tell them about my blindness, I tell them other characteristics about myself. I enjoy reading, writing, exercising, shopping, going to movies, visiting with friends . . . This is my way of letting them know who I am as a person, and we can establish a community atmosphere from the beginning

Back to the movies-- how could one discuss the portrayal of blindness in movies without discussing *Ray*? If we set aside his drug addiction and womanizing behaviors (which are a lot to set aside), I still found it to be a mixed portrayal of blindness. He claims he walks independently with special shoes that create a distinct noise, but it's nerve-wracking for me to watch him walking down the sidewalk without a cane or dog. He is not included when the other band members go out, in fact one man exclaims that he "ain't no babysitter". To further complicate the matter, Ray repeatedly refers to his life as "null and void". I don't think this message inspires one to embrace blindness proudly.

The thing that struck me about *Ray* was his mother. After he loses his sight, she explains that she will show him how to do something one time, help him on the second, and the third time he's on his own. She tells him he "ain't stupid" and to use his memory and his hands. This is an example of a parent doing what she knows to help make her child independent. When she felt she couldn't take him any further, she turned to the school for the blind which she believed could take him further. This is probably what most parents do in this situation. They seek out the knowledge and resources that can help make their children independent and successful. . When my parents sent me to Lions Camp, or when my mom took me to the career seminar, they were doing what they knew to help. They were trying to help me find role models, people I could look to and think "I want to be like that", people who could inspire within me a vision for my own future. When I think about the people who inspired me, they are ordinary people who happen to be blind. They are living whole lives, filled with the same complexities and variations as sighted people. I believe that children today need this same type of role model. They need

to see that blindness doesn’t have to limit the vision and goals that they have for the future. They need to network and communicate with people who are confident and proud, instead of fearing the possibility of becoming someone who fumbles and bumbles. They need to acquire the skills needed to approach life realistically and successfully, instead of believing that they are amazing just because they climbed a flight of stairs or signed their name.. Like the woman at her high school reunion, blind children need to have a mentor to whom they can say, “Thank you, you’ve made my life”.